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GERMAN WOMEN AS SPECIAL TARGET FOR MORALE OPERATIONS

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Description

A study of the limitations and advantages of directing Morale Operations against German women as a specific target.

4 April 1944

SUMMARY

Women are an important target for MO, but in view of their traditionally passive political role, their usefulness will lie primarily in their function as a medium of distribution, by which politically more active groups (soldiers and workers) can be reached. The most effective direct action which women can be expected to contribute to the opposition movement is an increase in absenteeism and labor-evasion, particularly if it is done in such a way as to encourage male workers to follow their example.

GERMAN WOMEN AS AN MO TARGET

I

Morale operations against a specific stratum of the German population cannot be judged simply in terms of the size and vulnerability of that segment; the ultimate criterion for the selection of a target for a major campaign must be the likelihood that attacks on that target will result in action favorable to us. In the case of German women, there is little doubt that they form a sizable target (40 percent of industrial workers, 50-60 percent of farm workers, etc.) and it is a commonplace that their lot has been harder in this war than in any previous national crisis. The question remains: is the morale of women politically relevant? Can we hope for anti-war and anti-Nazi action from women?

I. Negative factors.

There are, initially, important factors pointing to a negative answer to the above question.

(A) Traditional political apathy. German women have never been politically active. Militant feminism, pacifist leagues, and the like, never developed on a broad mass basis among them. The stereotype of the unworldly Hausfrau is to a large degree accurate; thus, even though the objective situation may be extremely bad, there is no reservoir of political experience in expressing resentment, and their experiences in the Nazis mass organizations have tended in quite the opposite direction: resignation and grudging compliance with official orders.

(B) Fear of Russia. Assuming this political naivete, it follows that Hitler's principle weapon for keeping war-weary Germans in the fight at this state--the Bolshevik Bogey--will be particularly effective among women. The available evidence supports this expectation. Fear of Russia is extremely great among women, so great that in the opinion of one German emigre analyst all PW against German women is futile.[1]

II. Positive Factors.

The above objections to the use of women as an MO target are important. But they can be neutralized by framing the campaign so that women are not the PW objective, but primarily a channel, by which important objectives may be reached:

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1. The hollowness of such sweeping statements is indicated by a recent report in the Tagespost (Graz) 18 February 1944 (News Digest 1386) in which Gauleiter Uiberreither, speaking at a rally for women, warned them against "illusions that Bolshevism would make any exceptions in its determination to destroy ..."

(A) The influence of German wives and mothers on the soldiers at the front is clearly worthy of exploitation by MO. And precisely because they are politically naive, women may be expected to transmit attitudes and information whose content is explosive for those who can see it in a political context.

(B) The same situation holds true of women industrial workers. Among German working men, they can be used to circulate provocative information. Where the majority of workers are foreigners, German women workers are particularly useful: because of what the Nazis constantly condemn as their "misplaced sympathy," they make friendly gestures--ranging from gifts of food to assistance in escape--toward foreigners in the factories. MO contacts among these foreign workers could make use of women to set ideas in motion and to reach male workers with whom friendly relations are initially more difficult to establish. These possibilities should not be exaggerated, however; to many German women foreign workers--particularly men-represent nothing less than an alien intruder, but for whom their own German husbands would still be at their jobs instead of at the front. Even this, of course, could be used to our advantage; to some women the situation could be quite frankly presented: there is no conflict of interest--the foreigners want to go home, the women want their husbands back, and the latter will be only too glad to return. All that stands in the way is the Nazi Party.

In this connection, the German housewife is also exposed to foreign (mostly Russian) women--as domestic helpers--and intercept material indicates that this close contact has to some extent led to attitudes of actual respect for these Untermenschen: "After we got her scrubbed up and gave her some clothes she was quite human-looking, and she is a good, hard worker." Conversely, however, a joke now current in Germany (no doubt started by Nazi Home-front MO) suggests that the maid-servants may be a constant reminder of the threat of "bolshevik terror." The maid in this story, fond of her employer, says: "Frau Schmidt, you can count on me to stand by you whe n the Red Army comes. I will see to it that they do not torture you, but shoot you right away."

(C) Because they are less likely to initiate political disturbances and moreover would require an enormous additional control force, housewives and women in general are less subject to terror controls than men. Also, in the normal process of maintaining a household, women meet and talk with a great number and a wide variety of people, which, taken with their relative political immunity, makes them excellent subjects for rumor spreading. In addition, their daily rounds bring them in contact with the Party at the lowest levels. Though these levels are the object of widespread popular criticism, they are also the effective arm of the Party's welfare and consumer-goods administration, which particularly in raided areas is the main support of the population and an important tie binding the people to the regime.

Summary: Women are an important target for MO, but their usefulness lies primarily in their possible role as channels of distribution, by which politically more active groups (soldiers, workers) can be reached.

III. Vulnerabilities (areas of greatest insecurity among women)

(A) Casualties at the front. Any MO appeal which concerns the casualty rate, particularly in Russia, is likely to be retained and spread by German women. For example, a defeatist report on the industrial manpower situation, which would ordinarily be difficult to set in motion, can be assured rapid circulation if it begins with the line "Because of our terrific losses in Russia..." Reports of decent treatment of German prisoners by the Allies will likewise find their way into letters to German soldiers. The German press frequently warns its readers not to believe all they read in letters from relatives in United States' POW camps.

(B) Air raids and evacuation. The area of the most luxuriant growth of rumors, doggedly denied in the German press, has been that of air raids and evacuation. Here the ambivalence of popular attitudes toward the Party is most clearly revealed. Reports of complete lack of confidence in the Party's ability or intentions with regard to recompensation and resettlement after the war are no more frequent than fervent affirmations of gratitude to the Party for its immediate aid in the air raid catastrophies: "without the Party we could never have held out." This materialistic tie with the Party is serious, particularly among women, for whom it may be the only positive link with the regime at the present time. Its negation is possible only (a) by destroying the Party's relief scheme, which air war has so far been unable to do, or (b) by stressing the fallacy in this gratitude to the Party, namely, that the Nazis, who now get credit for enabling people to exist somehow in the ruins of bombed cities or in rural evacuation areas are also the ultimate cause of the destruction and the main reason for its mounting fury. Here again, women are not likely to act on the basis of this realization. But they could do an important job in spreading this interpretation among those groups who can act.

The absence of articulate opposition or at least strong defeatist sentiment among the thousands of propertyless bombed-outs is at least partially due to the conservative influence of women, who react to their dispossession simply by making confident plans for the restoration of their homes at government expense after the war.[1] The destruction of

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1. In general, the reaction of the middle-classes to the loss of their property in air raids is not "proletarianization," i.e., a change in their attitudes towards property, but renewed support for whatever group will guarantee the return of their possessions. The Party has been quick to point out that this compensation can only be assured by a Nazi victory.

this faith in the inevitability of repayment under the Nazis will remove still another prop from the structure of popular support, and the naive expression of such skeptical sentiments in factories, for instance, would be very heartening to those workers who are reported to be thinking of "pooling our resources after the war and beginning all over again."

(C) Youth. The public denial of rumors that recent youth mobilization decrees are aimed at further estrangement of children from parents suggests that this objection, as old as National Socialism, is still virulent and widely held. In addition, mothers are worried over the mental, moral, and physical dangers to which their sons and particularly their daughters are exposed in their industrial and army-navy auxilliary jobs far from home. This is a particularly useful area of anxiety to exploit because the potential targets of resentment are again the Party (Labor Front, Hitler Youth, Air Defense League, etc.)

(D) Labor. The most spirited resistance to Nazi measures by women has been their widespread and persistent evasion of labor conscription. In the initial stages of "total mobilization," in the spring of 1943, they resisted registration so effectively that the program was delayed several times in some large cities, and the press published not only threats but records of court decisions against female labor-draft evaders. They persuaded so many doctors to give them medical releases that the authorities finally put the problem of medical exemptions entirely in the hands of Labor Front doctors. The rate of absenteeism among those who finally went to work is apparently high, and factory doctors are now permitted to call at the homes of workers who report sick, to ascertain that the illness is real. Recently a German editor warned that those women who have avoided labor registration by constantly traveling from place to place will soon be tracked down by the authorities.

The key factor for MO in this development is that it is probably entirely unpolitical. These women simply do not want to work in a factory--even half-time--in addition to maintaining a household.[1] There are a great number of reasons for this: (i) the wages are not a great lure, in view of the accelerating scarcity of consumers' goods; (ii) the problem of securing food, fuel, and shelter is bad enough when one has all day to devote to it; (iii) supervision of children, especially adolescents, is almost impossible if the mother works; (iv) working mothers are separated from their children, must stay behind at their jobs when juveniles are evacuated; and (v) the conditions of work are often below standard, particularly in factories which were not designed with the intention of housing female workers.

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1. More than half of the 12,000,000 women workers in industry and commerce are married; 25 percent have one or more children. (CID 53653-C)

On the other hand, it would be dangerous to overlook the possibility that, in the eyes of some women, the actual position of women has improved under the exigencies of total mobilization. The Nazis, while maintaining their medieval theory of woman's place, have been forced in fact to grant women a much more active role in the economy than they have ever had before. Women are filling hundreds of positions which formerly were assumed to be beyond their capacities or beneath their dignity. Female university enrollments have increased; women law students slightly outnumber males and they are filling many more technical research positions than before the war. To make this possible, the Party has had to institute and constantly expand a system of day-nurseries for working mothers as well as arrangements by which young girls assist themwith housework, rest-homes for working mothers and so on. Under wartime emergency pressure, these institutional arrangements have developed much more rapidly than they could have in peace, and there will be strong--perhaps successful--attempts by women to preserve these aids to working wives after the war. This positive aspect of the labor draft for women must not be lost sight of; it is likely to be relevant precisely in those groups where we might hope for the greatest support: namely, among far-sighted feminists or female intellectuals.

(E) Religion. The public resistance of church people to Nazi measures against traditional religion has always been in the name of prominent male clerics, but the popular support of this "opposition" comes overwhelmingly from German women. Censorship material has recently revealed that a growing number of women are resolving Germany's predicament by retreating to Divine protection.

Warnings in the German press and on the radio against soothsayers and other prophets have been increasing; late in January, 1944, German women were specifically advised to avoid fortune tellers who claim they can "look behind the curtain concealing the future." It is also reported that stories are being circulated in which Goebbels and Himmler appear as demonic incarnations of evil, visited on the Germans as punishment for their collective sins.

These symptoms of flight from reality are important, but their usefulness for MO depends on their being directed towards organized religious protest activity, because any group activity which is organized around well-established non-Nazi and non-Party symbols is, wittingly or not, an ultimate threat to the regime. Simply to exploit superstitions and mysticism, while it is possible through MO, would not necessarily advance our position or injure the Nazis'.

One caveat: it should be kept in mind that the relatively high sensitivity of German women to religious appeals is in one respect an Axis strength: namely, to the degree that this piousness supports anti-Soviet attitudes. The fear of Russian "godlessness" is probably more important among women than the fear of communism.

IV. Operations

The general position taken here--that women's low action-potential disqualifies them as a specific target for morale operations--implies that operations based on female vulnerabilities should not be discussed apart from the real objectives which it is hoped they may assist us in reaching. Consequently, all that can be suggested here is that the possibility of using women as intermediaries and disseminators be seriously considered as a part of every appeal which we make to specific German groups.

Broadly speaking, the groups which are in the best position to sabotage the Nazi war machine are workers and soldiers. This does not mean that revolt or mutiny is to be expected from these sources; but a soldier, or a hundred soldiers, can desert; and workers can develop nervous "illnesses" which keep them away from their jobs, in both instances contributing to a ground swell of defeatism as well as directly weakening German potential. The prospect of assistance from women in corroding the morale of soldiers is particularly bright. In fact, this assistance is already being rendered. Women are regularly provided--in the press and at rallies--with lists of "don'ts" in connection with their letters to soldiers. The effects we seek from soldiers are (a) the spread of defeatist talk in ranks, with the Party as the target of resentment, (b) the conviction that the soldier is needed more at home, to take care of his family, than he is at the front, where his sacrifices, however heroic, have no point; and (c) decreased fear of capture, especially at the hands of the Russians, all of these pointing towards (d) desertion.

The Party's major weapon in controlling opposition forces has been its success in dispersing or atomizing resistance groups. Likewise, in the army, defeatist sentiment wilts in the absence of group support. Letters to soldiers in which wives, sweethearts or sisters indicate, however subtly, that they would not consider a soldier a coward or traitor if he surrendered (arranged to be captured) would destroy an important psychological barrier to desertion. Even more effective would be references to slowdowns in factories, or the writer's own intentions of evading work or labor registration, i.e. factual demonstrations that the home-front is as fed up with the war as the average soldier is.

More directly, MO can contribute to this "factual demonstration" by operations aimed at extending female absenteeism, per se, and at infecting male and foreign workers with the same spirit. Moreover, for the same reasons that they stay away from work, women can be persuaded to slow down on the job, a process which is not only somewhat safer, but more contagious than absenteeism.[1]

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1. For a discussion of the surprisingly light penalties for absenteeism in Germany, where other war-economic crimes receive heavy punishment (including the death penalty) see Situation Report, CENTRAL EUROPE, No. 1113.50.

The question of over-all policy is extremely important in these operations. If there is no clear idea of what political effects are sought in a campaign, its impact will be correspondingly nebulous. For example, the practice of sending out a "batch" of rumors, some of them mutually contradictory in political content, in the hope that a few of them will take root, seems futile, particularly at this late stage of developments.

Finally, it may be useful to point out that morale operations will not necessarily be terminated along with hostilities. There is every reason to believe that "white" operations involving women can be a valuable adjunct to the formal work of Civil Affairs officers during the period of military occupation, and the sooner and the more carefully this type of operation is planned, the better.